



<https://publications.dainst.org>

iDAI.publications

DIGITALE PUBLIKATIONEN DES
DEUTSCHEN ARCHÄOLOGISCHEN INSTITUTS

Das ist eine digitale Ausgabe von / This is a digital edition of

Sengupta, Gautam

Two Unpublished Bronze Hoards from Northern West Bengal, India.

in: Franke-Vogt, Ute – Weisshaar, H.-J (Hrsg.), South Asian archaeology 2003: proceedings of the Seventeenth International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists, 7–11 July 2003, Bonn 471–477.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/mvc3-3u6b>

Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:

Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

Copyright (Digital Edition) © 2022 Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Zentrale, Podbielskiallee 69–71, 14195 Berlin, Tel: +49 30 187711-0

Email: info@dainst.de | Web: <https://www.dainst.org>

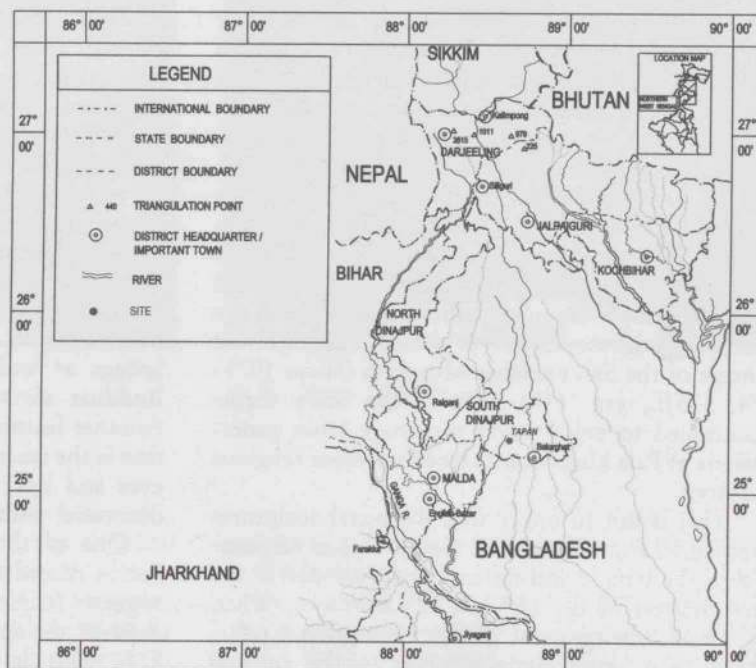
Nutzungsbedingungen: Mit dem Herunterladen erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen (<https://publications.dainst.org/terms-of-use>) von iDAI.publications an. Sofern in dem Dokument nichts anderes ausdrücklich vermerkt ist, gelten folgende Nutzungsbedingungen: Die Nutzung der Inhalte ist ausschließlich privaten Nutzerinnen / Nutzern für den eigenen wissenschaftlichen und sonstigen privaten Gebrauch gestattet. Sämtliche Texte, Bilder und sonstige Inhalte in diesem Dokument unterliegen dem Schutz des Urheberrechts gemäß dem Urheberrechtsgesetz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Die Inhalte können von Ihnen nur dann genutzt und vervielfältigt werden, wenn Ihnen dies im Einzelfall durch den Rechteinhaber oder die Schrankenregelungen des Urheberrechts gestattet ist. Jede Art der Nutzung zu gewerblichen Zwecken ist untersagt. Zu den Möglichkeiten einer Lizenzierung von Nutzungsrechten wenden Sie sich bitte direkt an die verantwortlichen Herausgeberinnen/Herausgeber der entsprechenden Publikationsorgane oder an die Online-Redaktion des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts (info@dainst.de). Etwaige davon abweichende Lizenzbedingungen sind im Abbildungsnachweis vermerkt.

Terms of use: By downloading you accept the terms of use (<https://publications.dainst.org/terms-of-use>) of iDAI.publications. Unless otherwise stated in the document, the following terms of use are applicable: All materials including texts, articles, images and other content contained in this document are subject to the German copyright. The contents are for personal use only and may only be reproduced or made accessible to third parties if you have gained permission from the copyright owner. Any form of commercial use is expressly prohibited. When seeking the granting of licenses of use or permission to reproduce any kind of material please contact the responsible editors of the publications or contact the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (info@dainst.de). Any deviating terms of use are indicated in the credits.

G. Sengupta

Two Unpublished Bronze Hoards from Northern West Bengal, India

Fig. 1. Map of Northern West Bengal.



The purpose of this communication is to discuss two groups of metal sculptures recovered from Northern West Bengal. In April 1995, district administration of the erstwhile West Dinajpur district informed the Directorate of Archaeology & Museums, Government of West Bengal, about archaeological objects lying in their custody.

In all, fifteen objects were recovered. Of these, one is a detached blackslab and the other a circular lid, probably of a container. Others represent Buddhist and Brahmanical deities. Broadly, sculptures are datable between c. 10th and 12th centuries of C.E. Their stylistic affiliation with the Pala-Sena idiom of Eastern India is unmistakable. These are now preserved at the West Bengal State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata.

There is no precise information about the findspot of the pieces. Going by the information

obtained from the local Police Station, four pieces of metal sculptures surfaced in course of ploughing a piece of land at Salas or Sulas about 1 km north-west of Tapan or Tarpandighi. Other eleven pieces were collected from an unspecified site of Gangarampur. Despite the lack of precise information, one cannot miss the significance of the area from which the bronzes were recovered. This is the core area of Pundravardhana/Varendra – an exceedingly important region in early Bengal, at least from the 3rd/2nd century C.E. During the Gupta and Pala-Sena period, c. 4th–6th C.E. and c. 8th–12th C.E. – the area continued to remain an important one and yielded no less than fifteen copper plate charters and stone inscriptions (Morrison 1974, 110ff.).

The site of Tapan (fig. 1) is better known on account of a 12th century C.E. copper plate charter “found in course of re-excavating an old tank

during 1873–74" (Majumdar 1929, 99). The village stands on a high mound. Salas from where the metal sculptures were recovered, is apparently a part of the sprawling archaeological site of Tapan. A large number of sculptures and architectural fragments were reported from Tapan and adjacent villages, some of which are housed in the museums of West Bengal and Bangladesh (Raham 1998, 311, pl. 289; Huntington 1985, 305, fig. 18,8). Significantly, the 12th century copper-plate charter of Lakshmana Sena from the site, which records gift of land in favour of a Brahmana, makes a specific reference to a Buddhist monastery (Buddha-vihara). Clearly, the religious landscape in the area had sizeable Buddhist elements.

Gangarampur, about 10 km north of Tapan, on the Malda Balurghat Road, is situated on a channel of the river Punarbhava. Bangarh, the early historic urban centre of Kotivarsa, is the most well known site of Gangarampur complex. The entire area is dotted with mounds, sculptures, architectural pieces, ancient water bodies and structures. K. G. Goswami's excavation report (Goswami 1948, 33ff.) clearly indicated the prosperity of the site in the Pala period when the site witnessed extensive building activity. An 11th century stone inscription from Bangarh, describes at length a massive temple-complex dedicated to Siva and the mother-goddesses as also to the installation of the image of the Saiva teacher Murtisiva (Sircar 1973–74, 135ff., esp. 148). Clearly the Saiva shrine continued to enjoy royal patronage from generations of Pala kings and thrived as a major religious centre.

This is not to imply that the metal sculptures recovered from Tapan and Gangarampur originated in the temple and monastery mentioned in the inscriptions of the 11th and 12th centuries. What, however, emerges out of the inscriptional reference, is a better understanding of the cultural milieu that supported architectural programme, stone carving and metal casting in the area.

Whether the mutually exclusive cultic character of two different hoards is fortuitous or a matter of conscious choice of the devotee remains an open-ended problem. Given the modest dimension of the pieces (between 5.7 cm × 6.2 cm and 16.8 cm × 9.1 cm) these were most likely meant for house-hold worship.

While all the pieces from Tapan/Salas are Buddhist, the Gangarampur group is without exception Brahmanical.

Three pieces of Tapan represent bejeweled Buddha, and the fourth an Avalokitesvara. The Gangarampur hoard contains a Visnu, two Uma Mahesvara, a Ganesa, three Devi, a Saivite object and a triad consisting of Devi, Ganesa and a bearded deity. One can probably speculate on the Saiva-Sakta bias of the devotee or patron. What distinguishes the Tapan hoard is the preponderance of the bejeweled Buddhas. The Buddha is seated

in *Vajraparyankasana*, the right hand displays *Bhumisparsa-mudra* and the left rests on the folded heel. The upper garment is thrown on the left shoulder, keeping the right uncovered; its end spreads like a sparrow's tail before the seated figure. Buddha wears an elaborate crown – triangular in shape and secured by a band with projected ends on either side. Crowns were studded with precious or semi-precious stones as indicated by the empty sockets. Apart from the crown the figures also wear earrings and necklace. Three types of necklace were in use – a broad band, a thin wavy band and a more elaborate version comprising of pearl-bead necklace with a row of pendants. The Buddha is seated on the pericarp of a double petalled lotus, each pedestal neatly crafted with flared outer edge. Sensitive modelled, the figures have on the whole a triangular structure. Significantly, none of the bejeweled figures wear any ornament on their arms. Identified earlier as crowned Buddha, these are now designated as Buddha Sakyamuni by G. Bhattacharya, who argued that the "sculptors ... were very conscious of their task in representing bejeweled Sakyamuni and to make a distinction between him and the bejeweled *panca* Tathagata. For Buddha Sakyamuni they never provided jewellery in his arms" (Bhattacharya 2000, 35ff.). Bhattacharya's hypothesis holds good for metal images as well. None of the Kurkihar bronze Buddhas show armlets and similar ornaments. Another feature of Tapan images that merit attention is the trace of gilding. At least in one example, eyes and lips were inlaid with silver and crown decorated with colourful stones.

One of the figures bears an almost illegible votive record on the lotus base. G. Bhattacharya suggests (personal communication) that the character of the script is Gaudiya of the 10th century C.E. This is certainly the most matured and evolved figure displaying a high degree of aesthetic attainment (fig. 2). Two other pieces have lost much of the visual appeal because of the textural deterioration, but retain enough to indicate their obvious relationship with the inscribed figure, both in style and chronological location.

The Avalokitesvara (fig. 3) is seated in *Ardhaparyankasana* on a double petalled lotus with his right foot resting on a lotus leaf. His right hand is in *Varada-mudra* and the left holds a full-blown lotus by its stalk. He wears *ajina* and necklace made of pearl-beads and an *upavita*. A belt showing striation secures his lower garment. Jina Amitabha is depicted on his *Jatamukuta*. The figure may be dated to c. 10th century C.E.

The Tapan group, bejeweled Buddhas in particular, raise serious problem about the stylistic source. It is not improbable that the bronzes were locally cast, but a number of features, visual and iconographic, point to unmistakable connections with Kurkihar. Despite their occurrences from



Fig. 2. Tapan: Crowned Buddha.



Fig. 3. Tapan: Avalokitesvara.

different sites of Bihar and Bengal, the crowned Buddha type has a particularly strong association with Kurkihar (Ray et al. 1986, 58). Crowned Buddha figures in metal from Bengal are virtually unknown. Apart from sharing a common structural built, Kurkihar and Tapan figures are strikingly similar in such details as three-peaked crown, treatment of eyes, and shape of ornaments. One may compare, for example, a crowned Buddha from Kurkihar of the second half of the 11th century with the inscribed Tapan piece (cf. Ray et al. 1986, fig. 144). The late 11th century figure has a slightly attenuated form, but there is no mistaking the obvious similarities. It is not unlikely that the Avalokitesvara also originated in Kurkihar area or drew generously upon the Kurkihar idiom. The *Jatamukuta* closely approximates what C. Bautze Picron calls the Bodh Gaya-Kurkihar style (Bautze-Picron 1985, 333).

The Gangarampur hoard, on the other hand, presents a more complex situation, both in terms of iconography and stylistic features. There is an inscribed piece bearing the name of the donor – *Danapati Pinu* (...) *Sya*. G. Bhattacharya (personal communication) suggests that the record is written in cursive character of about the 10th–11th

centuries; a period to which most of the figures in the hoard may be ascribed.

The Visnu (fig. 4) stands in *samapadasthanaka* on a compact single petalled lotus. He holds a *gada* on his upper right hand, a *chakra* on the upper left and a *sankha* on the lower left. The lower right hand is broken. Visnu's attendants, Sri and Pusti, stand on either side of the central figure. A donor couple is seated at the base. The Visnu is decked in a long *vanamala*, *yajnopvita*, necklace and earring. The cylindrical *kirita-mukuta* is set against a leaf-shaped halo. While the pedestal is a simple two-tired rectangular device, the oval-shaped aureole has its outer-edge decorated with stylised flame motif with a *kirtimukha* atop. The central figure is supported by a row of three horizontal crossbars. Somewhat stunned in appearance, the Visnu may be dated to c. 11th century C.E. It shares a number of features, like, the use of crossbar at the rear, aureole with stylised flame motif, arrangement of *ayudhas*, shape of the *gada*, leaf-shaped halo etc., with at least three 11th century sculpture, viz. a Surya from the Ajit Ghosh collection, a Visnu from Rangpur in the Indian Museum and another Visnu inscribed in the reign period of Vignrahapala III in the Varendra



Fig. 4. Gangarampur: Visnu.



Fig. 5. Gangarampur: Uma Mahesvara.

Research Museum, Rajshahi (Ray et al. 1986, figs. 240, 259a–b, 263).

In the Uma-Mahesvara composition (fig. 5) Siva is seated on *lalitasana* with the goddess seated diagonally on his lap. Siva holds Uma's chin with the front right hand, while the front left grasps her breast. She embraces Siva with her right hand and holds a mirror on the left. The divine couple is seated on a double-petalled lotus with their feet placed on lotus. A donor is seated on the pedestal. One of the figures is provided with an oval aureole with closely spaced flames on its outer-edge, while the Siva has a flower behind his head. The two-tiered pedestal shows *rathaka* projection. Significantly, here the Siva is not ithyphallic, a clear departure from the iconographic formula of the region.

The other composition (fig. 6) is more elaborate with Ganesa and Karttikeya seated on smaller lotus on either side of the divine couple. Unlike many other sculptures from Bengal, here Ganesa is two-armed instead of four. As usual, Siva in this composition is ithyphallic.

Both the pieces are probably of North Bengal origin, a hypothesis reinforced by the aureole format, and more importantly by the occurrence of an imposing flower behind Siva's head. One

may, for example, compare these features appearing in a bronze Uma-Mahesvara from Paharpur (Ray et al. 1986, fig. 192) and a stone sculpture in the Museum of Indian Art, Berlin (Bautze-Picron 1998, 238, fig. 235). The Gangarampur piece is distinguished by the lack of ornaments, simple pedestal, well proportioned and highly sensitive physical form making it an ideal 10th century example of Bengal art. The other piece with angular treatment of form, pointed nose and chin, jerky fingers and complex pedestal structure would indicate a date towards the 12th century C.E.

An enigmatic piece in the Gangarampur hoard is a Saivite object consisting of four spherical shapes attached to a central sphere surmounted on a circular lotus base which, in turn, is placed on a rectangular *patta* with a water-chute (*pranala*). Ganesa and Karttikeya are seen on two corners at the rear while the two corners at the front seem to depict heap of offerings (*arghya*) (fig. 7). We are unaware of any textual source mentioning such a form in precise terms but its Saiva character is indicated by the *linga*-like shape of the central sphere and the occurrence of Ganesa and Karttikeya. D. Desai refers to "numerous *pancha-lingas* (*pancha-pindas*) both aniconic and partly iconic with one face in the environs of Khajuraho", and



Fig. 6. Gangarampur: Uma Mahesvara.

illustrates an 11th century example and describes it as “*Pancha-linga* with Sadasiva or Isana-face” (Desai 1996, 60f., photo 60). She, however, does not cite any text in support of her identification.

Seated on a simple lotus seat, a four armed Ganesa holds an indistinct object (radish/broken tooth/lotus) on his upper right hand, the lower right is in *Varada-mudra*, the upper left carries a *parasu* (axe) and the lower left a *modaka-bhanda* (pot of sweets) in which he puts his trunk. The head is framed by a broad aureole. Ganesa wears a tall crown, armlets and bracelets. Near his right foot sits his mount – the mouse. Although the visual parameters are rather vague, the figure may be broadly dated to c. 11th/12th centuries C.E.

The only inscribed piece (fig. 8) in the group merits detailed discussion on account of its iconography. Three figures are seated on a rectangular pedestal. The central figure of Devi is seated in *Yogasana* holding a fruit or a pot. She wears a tall crown framed by an oval aureole decorated with intertwined leaves. To her right is Ganesa seated in *Lalitasana*, his upper right hand holding probably a lotus, the object on the lower right hand is indistinct. The upper left hand holds a *parasu* and the lower hand a *modaka-bhanda* with the trunk placed inside. His mount is placed near his

foot. The figure to the left is distinguished by his beard, a stylus on the right hand and an inkpot on the left. Both Ganesa and the bearded deity are seated in *Lalitasana* and wear crown and have *prabhavali* with leaf motif framing their head. A sprawling branch with boldly crafted leaves dominate the composition. At the centre of the pedestal is a pot or a heap of offering. The donor sits at the base. We are unaware of any other piece with identical iconographic scheme. N. R. Ray illustrated one example allegedly from Bengal datable to the late 10th century showing from viewers’ left Ganesa, a Devi with a child, another Devi on a lion and Bhairava. Ray identified it as Sakambhari but did not cite any textual source for his proposed identification¹. G. Bhattacharya discusses a triad from Bangladesh of the Gupta period with Ganesa Sri Lakshmi and Kuvera without reference to any text (Bhattacharya 2000, 315 ff.). The present triad eludes precise identification. But the presence of a fruit or pitcher and foliage on and above the *prabhavali* might indicate the creative aspect of the goddess. Attached to the hands of the goddess is what looks like a portion of foliage. Does it indicate foliage coming out of the pitcher? In that event, the identification as Sakambhari even without any textual backing might not be wide off the nomenclature.

Similar feature appears in a solitary Devi image showing her seated on *Padmasana* on a double-petalled lotus seat. She also holds a fruit or pitcher and there are traces of foliage on her arm and hand. She wears a crown seen in the other image with an aureole made of a broad band with a *kirtimukha* at the apex. The object at the centre of the base cannot be identified, but might represent a heap of offerings (*arghya*).

Two other Devi-s also hold an object, which looks more like a fruit (*vija-puraka*) in the right hand. On her left lap is a child. There is foliage on either side of her shoulder. Devi sits in *Lalitasana* on a lotus pedestal and her right foot is planted on another lotus. A cow and a calf are carved to the right on the pedestal. The circular aureole is made of a broad band with beaded borders with impressive crowning members. Devi wears a crown with two triangular peaks, necklace, armlets and bracelets; her garment indicated by striation. Devi has a powerful physical form, a broad face with pointed nose and chin, short forehead and triangular eyes, indicating a date around the 11th–12th centuries C.E. (fig. 9).

The identification of the Devi-s remains problematic – the child, fruit and foliage certainly underscore the motherhood of the goddesses making them *Matrikas*, but absence of specific

¹ Ray et al. 1986, fig. 246; for suggested identification see pp. 60f.



Fig. 7. Gangarampur: Saivite object.



Fig. 8. Gangarampur: Triad consisting of Devi, Ganesa and a bearded deity.

attributes and *vahana* compounds the problem. Similarly, the representation of cow and calf cannot probably be explained in terms of textual prescription. C. Bautze-Picron has illustrated two stone-sculptures datable to the 10th and 12th century C.E. showing Devi with child, fruit, sword and shield. These are identified as Durga, both the images show cow and calf on the pedestal –

probably as assertion of motherhood (Bautze-Picron 1998, 247, fig. 256). Bautze-Picron assigns them to north Bengal or eastern Bihar, but more likely North Bengal. Here in the Gangarampur figures, the obvious attributes of Durga are missing. What, however, is emphasized, is the motherly aspects. As such, they are best identified as *Matrikas* without being specific about the nomenclature.



Fig. 9. Gangarampur: Devi with child.

The Tapan and Gangarampur hoards make us aware of artists' and patrons' ability to draw upon diverse sources for form, motifs and iconographic features. During the early medieval period interactions among major and local centres contributed to the diffusion of stylistic and iconographic elements across the region. This was made possible by import of portable images from important centres like Kurkihar or Nalanda by the pilgrims and monks as also by the movement of artisans/craftsmen from one centre to the other in search of patrons. Mobility of the pilgrims and artists in the Pala-Sena period and its bearing on the spread of different stylistic idioms need to be analysed at some length.

There is yet another aspect of the problem. It becomes apparent that our understanding of the early medieval iconography is still inadequate. Textual sources so far utilized for the purpose, do not always explain features and attributes occurring in a number of images. Probably, we need to look beyond the Sanskrit texts as tools for explanation of Eastern Indian iconography between the 8th and 12th centuries of the C.E.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bautze-Picron, C.
 1985 Some Aspects of the Iconography of Avalokiteswar in "Pala Sena" Stone Sculpture. In: Frifelt, K./Sørensen, P. (eds.), *South Asian Archaeology*. London, 327-349.
 1998 *The Art of Eastern India in the Collection of the Museum für Indische Kunst*. Berlin.
- Bhattacharya, G.
 2000 *Essays in Buddhist Hindu Jain Iconography and Epigraphy*. Dhaka.
- Desai, D.
 1996 *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*. Mumbai.
- Goswami, K. G.
 1948 *Excavations at Bangarh*. Calcutta.
- Huntington, S.
 1985 *The Art of Ancient India*. New York, Tokyo.
- Majumdar, N. G.
 1929 *Inscriptions of Bengal*, vol. III. Rajshahi.
- Morrison, B. M.
 1974 *Political Centres and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*. Tucson.
- Rahman, M.
 1998 *Sculptures in the Varendra Research Museum: A Descriptive Catalogue*. Rajshahi.
- Ray, N. R., et al.
 1986 *Eastern Indian Bronzes*. New Delhi.
- Sircar, D. C.
 1973-74 *Bangarh Inscriptions of Time of Nayapala*. In: *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, VII (1-2). Calcutta.